



Alyce D. LaViolette  
Ola W. Barnett

Third Edition

# It Could Happen to Anyone

Why Battered Women Stay

书馆



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Why Battered Women Stay

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Third Edition

# It Could Happen to Anyone

# Foreword

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A couple of years ago, when my husband was away on a business trip and my sons had a day off from school, I slipped while running from the shower to answer the phone. I had been waiting for that call all morning and, as luck would have it, the phone started ringing just as I got the shampoo into a nice lather. In what seemed like an instant, my right foot went out from under me, my body twisted, and my head hit the woodwork on the wall before slamming down on the polished slate floor. Trying hard not to pass out so that my children wouldn't find me and then bring in the neighbors to rescue their naked mother, I realized that the right side of my face was resting in a pool of blood. When I finally looked in the mirror, I saw a deep gash just above my right eye, like the kind of cut a boxer gets when an opponent connects with a left jab. The hospital is within walking distance of our house, but my sons were still too young at the time to leave home alone, so off they went with me. They were feeling guilty for not having answered the phone themselves, and they were worried about what would happen to me at the hospital. As I walked hand in hand with them and saw the fear on their faces, it suddenly dawned on me: "Damn, I look like a battered wife. This visit to the emergency room is going to take forever. They're going to ask me dozens of questions, and they won't believe me when I tell them how it really happened. Maybe they'll even question the kids separately while my face is being stitched."

Domestic violence—it could happen to anyone? Not in the eyes of the hospital staff who treated me that Friday morning. The intake clerk was more concerned about the kind of insurance I had than about my injury. The nurse asked me rather perfunctorily how I got the injury, but she never made eye contact with me as she busied herself setting out the medical supplies the doctor would be using. As the doctor examined my eye, he chuckled, and with my children sitting right beside me, he asked, "What happened? Did your husband beat you up?" That was the proverbial last straw; the ER doc got an earful. "As a matter of fact," I began, "I really

expected you to seriously question me about how I got hurt. Domestic violence isn't funny. Do you know what I do for a living?" Of course, he didn't, but I filled him in. Maybe my lecture will make him think twice before he talks to an injured woman like that again, although I strongly doubt it. I am fairly certain that the experience had a more profound effect on me than on any of the hospital staff I encountered, including the ER physician.

Walking home from the hospital, I remembered my earlier thought—"I look like a battered wife"—and asking myself in the light of the ER staff's response, "What does a 'battered wife' look like? What did I need to look like for the staff at that hospital to be concerned about my safety?" In the pages that follow, Alyce LaViolette and Ola Barnett's answer to the first question is, "Any woman." In the diversity of battered women's voices that they present and in their own words, they emphasize that domestic violence can occur in wealthy households as well as poor ones; among couples of any race or ethnicity; among Native Americans and descendants of the Mayflower pilgrims, as well as recently arrived immigrants and refugees; among the young and the old, the physically abled and the disabled; among those who are straight as well as those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. Nevertheless, one of the things I like most about this book is the authors' simultaneous awareness of the importance of disadvantage and marginalization in the etiology of domestic violence. Yes, it can happen to anyone, but research is increasingly showing that women who are economically and socially disadvantaged—women who are poor, nonwhite, noncitizens or refugees, very young or very old, disabled, and/or not heterosexual—are often at especially high risk of violent victimization and also are often overlooked or neglected by service providers. The irony of the dual effects of disadvantage and marginalization in terms of victimization and service provision are not lost on me in light of my own experience. When I went to the hospital that Friday morning, my statuses were pretty obvious: I am an upper-middle-class, white, U.S.-born, forty-something, physically abled, heterosexual woman—I'm not supposed to be battered because that happens to Other women. Yet, had I been one of those Other women—and this book documents this point well—abuse may have been suspected, but I would not necessarily have been asked about it, and I likely would have been treated with disdain or even hostility.

But LaViolette and Barnett do not just cite research studies or their own practice experiences to make these points; instead, they let us hear the pain, the personal conflicts, and the tremendous strength and resilience of the real experts on domestic violence—battered women. Interspersed with statistics and research findings are the stories of battered women from diverse backgrounds, stories usually told in their own words. It is these stories, I think, that do most to shatter the stereotypes of what a battered woman

“looks like” and how she’s supposed to think, feel, and act. Moreover, these stories document not only the diversity of battered women, but also the diversity of their experiences. They force us to rethink traditional definitions and images of battering. I have long argued that standard measures of physical and psychological abuse, with their long list of horrors, miss the point. Some batterers hit and punch to control and punish their partners, some restrict social contacts or disconnect the telephone, and some tailor the battering to the specific vulnerabilities of the victim—after all, being intimate brings with it knowledge of a partner’s otherwise secret fears. Our measures of who did what to whom how many times typically do not identify these very individualized forms of abuse. Instead, we hear them in women’s personal accounts, and LaViolette and Barnett must be applauded for including these women’s words. As those of us in academia continue to argue over whether it is methodologically more sound to use broad or narrow definitions of abuse, this book reminds us to do what we should have been doing all along: *listen to battered women*.

Let the reader beware: This is not a “fun” or entertaining book to read. It is a powerful, often gut-wrenching book that you may have to read in small pieces, not only to deal with your emotional reactions, especially to some of the women’s experiences, but also to think long and hard about the issues it raises. For me, for example, the book brought to the surface many of the conflicts I feel in working to eliminate violence against women and increase women’s safety, while at the same time holding batterers accountable for their behavior. We often encourage battered women to leave abusive relationships, but leaving for some women may mean giving up eligibility for public housing, the only housing they can afford. Many of us in the battered women’s movement have advocated for mandatory arrest policies only to find following the enactment of such legislation more women being caught in the police net, usually for defending themselves or retaliating against a batterer—behavior that is nonetheless violent in the eyes of the criminal justice system. Mandatory arrest laws have also had a disproportionate impact on communities of color. And do we really want to solve the problem of domestic violence by locking more men away in prisons and jails that have abandoned the goal of rehabilitation?

In *Why Battered Women Stay*, Alyce LaViolette and Ola Barnett challenge us to think critically about how we *imagine* battered women and batterers, and about how we *respond* to battered women and batterers. As we embark on a new century, I think that unfortunately *inclusivity* remains an elusive goal of the battered women’s movement. LaViolette and Barnett and, most important, the battered women whose voices we hear in these pages remind us that if we exclude any group from our work, we will not

succeed in ending violence. This goal of inclusivity remains elusive to some extent because of the current political climate dominated by a “lock ’em up and throw away the key” mentality. However, not all women and men are equally likely to be locked up; it is the disadvantaged and marginalized who, as always, bear the brunt of this burden. As we begin the 21st century, then, we must reevaluate our current policy goals for meeting the needs of battered women and addressing men’s violence. And that reevaluation must include a critical analysis of how each policy may impact—for better or for worse—women and men from *all* social groups in our society.

When I sat down to read this book, I certainly didn’t think I had all the answers, but I was pretty confident I had a good bit of the puzzle sorted out. This book substantially shook my confidence, and I’m grateful to Alyce LaViolette and Ola Barnett for the wake-up call.

—Claire M. Renzetti

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